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ABSTRACT

To investigate the reaction of the public to being photographed on the street, a study was devised whereby seven photojournalists approached people on the street, photographed them, and requested identification for a questionnaire follow up. Of 102 people approached, 87% cooperated fully with the photographers and 81% of that group returned the questionnaires regarding their reactions to being photographed. Responses to the questionnaire indicated that while the majority of people approved of street photography, 40% qualified their approval contingent on the permission of the subject. Other questionnaire responses revealed the following: most subjects were surprised, and some suspicious, about being photographed; few had any knowledge of photography; most felt that they were being photographed because of their actions, rather than their physical attributes; and the majority did not remember specific actions that pleased or annoyed them, but rather had a general reaction to the photographer and the experience.
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STREET PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE SUBJECT'S VIEWPOINT

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Street Photography From the Subject's Viewpoint

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ABSTRACT

Photojournalism, and particularly street photography, has been criticized as offensive to the public. To investigate the public's reaction to being photographed on the street, seven photojournalists approached people on the street, photographed them, and got their identification. 102 people were approached, 87% cooperated fully with the photographers, and 81% of that group returned questionnaires sent to them concerning their reaction to being photographed.

Initially, the subjects were surprised at being approached, not understanding why someone would want to take their picture. Many were also suspicious. Their reactions tended to become more favorable as the interaction with the photographer continued. Those people who had more chance to observe the photographers at work before being approached took the encounter more in stride. Most subjects had little familiarity with photography; they felt the photographer photographed them because of their actions, but not because of their physical attributes. The subjects did not remember specific actions that pleased or annoyed them; instead they carried away a general reaction to the photographer.

On the whole, the people approved of street photography; 40% qualified their approval contingent on the photographer gaining the subject's permission, although permission prior to shooting was demanded by only 6% of the respondents. Other mentioned good taste and not inconveniencing the subjects as requirements for street photography.

In this study, the public's response to being photographed on the street by professional photojournalists was favorable. The results of this study are compared to those of a study by Stanley Milgram of reactions to street photography in Manhattan, in which he found a generally uncooperative attitude on the part of the people approached. Reasons for the differences are suggested.

Criticism of photojournalism on ethical grounds is not new. But in the last few years cries of "stay away" have grown louder. Not only are people questioning whether certain pictures should be published, they are asking whether the photograph should be taken at all. Street photography has come under special fire, for a number of reasons. It usually involves an encounter between strangers; the subject often is not a public figure; he often does not give prior permission; no one is "safe" from the camera's eye.

One argument against street photography has been that the photographer exerts power over his subjects, stealing an image which belongs rightfully to the person alone. Stanley Milgram wrote that a tourist, photographing a peasant, takes a picture:

> he does not create it or borrow it...I find it hard to understand wherein the photographer derives the right to keep for his own purpose the image of the peasant's face. "Give it back, give it back" the peasant might cry, "it's my face not yours."[1]

Ellen Goodman, a syndicated columnist, wrote that the sensitive photographer does not steal his subject's image. But she attacked the majority of photojournalists as insensitive. She echoed Milgram's claim that they are stealing images from unwitting subjects on the street. She wrote,

> Where do we get the right to bring other people home in a canister? Where did we lose the right to control our image? ... Do we lose our right to privacy simply by stepping into view?[2]

Goodman's article, when reprinted in the National News Photographers Association magazine News Photography, brought a number of reader responses defending street photography. Wayne Kelly, Assistant Professor of Journalism at California State University, wrote:

> Both Goodman and Milgram see something sinister in what I suggest is a sincere form of flattery and compassion in trying to capture on film that fleeting moment of brotherhood many of us feel when we visit people of other lands.
>
> I was not annoyed a few years ago when a Japanese tourist asked to "take" a photograph of my blond-haired blue-eyed son during our annual outing in Disneyland ...[3]

Dick Swoboda, Chief Photographer for the McAlester, Oklahoma News Capital, mimicked Goodman's article, applying all the same arguments she used to word journalism instead of photojournalism:

> Where do we get the right to bring other people home in a note pad? Where did we lose the right to control our own spoken words?[4]

A second objection to public photography comes from Susan Sontag and A. D. Coleman. They draw a picture of the photographer, not so much as a thief sneaking away in the dark, but as a person who compulsively consumes all he sees. Sontag writes of the photographer performing a murder, if only he could. But since he has been emasculated, or at least drained of energy, by contemporary society, he takes pictures instead:

> There is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have. To photograph is to turn people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. To photograph someone is a sublimated murder, just as the camera is the sublimation of a gun. Taking pictures is a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.[5]

Coleman presents a very similar argument, picturing the photographer as a dimestore cowboy who wishes the shutter were a trigger:

> Certainly it is not coincidental that such terms as snap shot (whose origin is in the language of hunting), grab shot, blitz, and picture-taking are commonly used in reference to photographing. They describe the acts of attack, acquisition and possession. Photographers, both amateur and professional, often seem to harbor fantasies of themselves as heroes, talking about their work as though they were soldiers or gunfighters.[6]

Coleman goes on to talk about photography as an acquisitive act, citing an example of a photographer who took a picture of a grizzled man slumped in a

doorway: "She had used her camera not to explore but to acquire."

What matters most in this argument, however, is what the people who are being photographed think. Do people who are photographed in public object? Do they think the photographer is stealing their image or threatening them? The answer is important for, in this situation, the people's reaction determines whether the action is ethical. One cannot steal something that is handed to you willingly.

Milgram based some of his objections to photography on a study conducted by him and his students. They went to midtown Manhattan, carrying cameras, and asked over a hundred strangers, "May I take your picture?" If pressed for further information, they said, "I'm interested in photography." They had a large number of rejections: 65% of the people approached refused. In another locale, Bryant Park, 50% refused. Milgram noted that the person's occupation at the time he approached affected his response: five out of six people who were lying on the grass agreed to be photographed. He did not report how the subjects were chosen, the age or the dress of the students. Milgram concluded that, even in this society where photography is well accepted, there are serious objections to street photography by the public.

To investigate Milgram's charges of public objection to street photography, and to look more closely at people's reactions to being photographed, we undertook a field study of professional photojournalists working on the street. Seven working photojournalists were invited to Bloomington, Indiana to shoot pictures of people on the street.* The photographers were chosen to get a variety of people who perform relatively similar jobs. Two are freelance photographers, one works for a large circulation newspaper; two work

*This paper reports part of a larger study the author did for her doctoral dissertation.

for medium-sized newspapers; one works for a small newspaper; one is employed by a wire service. Five are men; two women. All are Caucasian. Their ages range from twenty-five to forty-five.

Each photographer was told he was taking part in a study about photojournalists' relationships with their subjects. He was asked to shoot pictures of at least twelve individuals and to record their names and addresses. He was encouraged to work in his accustomed manner, take as long as desired, and pick whomever he wanted as subjects. He was asked to shoot at least a medium and/or head shot of each person, not to use a telephoto lens, and to shoot pictures of single people, although the subjects could have companions. If the subjects asked about the reason for being photographed, the photographer was asked to say he was working on a project shooting pictures of people on the streets of Bloomington for the School of Journalism. He could say as little or as much of that explanation as he wished. If the subject was not satisfied (although the large majority were), he could explain as much of the project as he felt was necessary. He did not lie to the subject except through omission.

All the photographers worked at the same location. Bloomington is a small city of approximately 50,000 people. The university is the largest employer in the city, but not the only one. There is also an RCA plant, Westinghouse, Otis Elevator, limestone quarries and small industries. The city is the county seat of Monroe County, one of the poorest counties in the state. There is a normal amount of town-gown rivalry. The campus, about seven blocks from the Courthouse Square, is connected to the downtown area by Kirkwood Avenue, which is lined with businesses. The site for the study was on Kirkwood, a block from the Courthouse. In this area there is

high pedestrian flow, well mixed with both life-time residents and students. The half-block area on which the photographers roamed is lined with planters, benches and fountains, encouraging walking and loitering.

The same day the photographer worked, a questionnaire was sent to each subject who agreed to give his name and address. 102 people were approached; 87% of those cooperated with the photographer; 81% of that group returned the questionnaires. The questionnaires were not anonymous, but the subjects were promised their names would not be linked with their comments to the photographers.

In the area they worked, the photographers were not able to be unobtrusive; most people noticed the photographer before they were approached. The subjects of the first photographer were specifically asked if they were aware of him before he shot their pictures. All but one said they were. The one who did not was worried about falling on ice and stared intently at the ground. The question was discontinued for the subjects of the remaining six photographers, yet all felt their subjects, with very few exceptions, saw them on the street before the subject was approached. Many of the subjects mentioned voluntarily that they saw the photographer ahead of time.

It is interesting, then, that the most common response to the question, "What was your first reaction when the photographer approached you?" was "I was surprised." Their surprise, it appears, was not a startled response, but wonder that the photographer picked them. As one respondent said:

> I was basically surprised and amused and flattered. As I was approaching, I saw the camera and the man planning the shot down the street, and since I was in the shot, I moved ahead. But, he asked, as I walked by, if he could shoot me. It was odd.

Another:

> Surprised. I thought he was taking a picture of the building, and I hesitated so I wouldn't be in his way.

Another:

> I was thinking that the photographer wanted to take a picture of my son who was talking with me.

And:

> I was surprised because I couldn't understand why a stranger would want to take my picture.

Photojournalists should take into consideration this reaction. They often expect hostility, suspicion and anger from subjects. They also feel if the subject can be convinced of their honesty and good will, then he will understand and agree to cooperate. It is true the subject may agree to cooperate with the photographer he feels is honest, but the subject who agrees still may not understand why the photographer is shooting his picture. It may be worth the photographer's while to give the subject, besides his name and employer, a short explanation of what kinds of things attract photographers' eyes or why he would want to take a picture of an average person going about his own business. It is not as obvious to the subject as it is to the photographer.

After surprise, the next most popular response (see Figure 1) was suspicion. Suspicion was often based on the thought that the photographer wanted to sell them something. "I wondered what the scheme would be this time," one subject wrote, "Get rich quick or you can be a model..." Another wrote, "I thought it was a commercial gimmick." These suspicions were not unfounded, of course. There are photographers, usually in large cities, who shoot pictures of people on the sidewalk--usually people who look like tourists--then try and sell the photographs to the people. It is not common, however, in a small non-resort town such as Bloomington. Some people had a suspicious feeling based on other assumptions about strangers. One young man, who mentioned that he sold illicit substances for a living, worried the photographer might be a law enforcement officer. The same suspicion was repeated by three other young subjects. One said the photographer

"looked like a narc." The other two said they had been involved in anti-war demonstrations during the Vietnam War and had become paranoid about strangers photographing them. A young lady had other suspicions: "At first," she wrote, "I wasn't sure if he was just some creep trying to take pictures of girls and get their name and number for who knows what reason." Although it took different forms depending on the subject's experience, suspicion was prevalent and strongly stated.

FIGURE 1

Response to "What was your first reaction when the photographer approached you?"

Surprise	30*	Embarrassment	6
Suspicion	13	Curiosity	5
Flattery	12	Amusement	2
Neutral	10	Empathy	1
Irritation	8	TOTAL	87

*n=total times the reaction was mentioned. The question was open ended, so the total equals more than the number of subjects.

Often the first impressions were mixed:

> My first reaction was one of suspicion mixed with flattery.
>
> Maybe a little embarrassed at first, but it's flattering to have someone take your picture.

And even more mixed:

> At first impression, slightly annoyed, but in an agreeable manner.

The people were asked if their responses changed in any way. Those who reported a change in response were more likely to go from a negative or neutral first impression to a more positive impression, than the other direction. Only two people said their response changed in a negative

direction. One person felt an initial desire to help but became wary when the photographer asked for her name and address. The second person assumed the photographer was shooting a "pleasing, illustrative candid" and became "unexplainedly angry" to find it was an academic project. Three other subjects gave their first impression as negative, and said their feelings did not change. However, there were twenty people who reported changing their overall impression in a positive direction. One man, who was with his wife and child, said,

> First reaction was that we were going to be solicited for the purchase of photographs. When we saw that the photographer was serious about taking our photograph and was not particularly over zealous or trying to sell us his services, we were able to relax somewhat and enjoy the experience. In other words, our defenses against invasion from strangers were relaxed.

There were a significant number of people (21) who said they experienced no emotion of any kind when approached. These people found it an unexceptional encounter. This could in part be traced to the university town syndrome of expecting the unusual, but the university does not provide the sole explanation. One man wrote:

> I assumed that he just wanted to take pictures of ordinary people going about their business and hence I simply ignored him.

Now, this man had been sitting for some time on a sidwalk bench, so had a chance to watch the photographer work before he was approached. A lady who works in the card shop on the block expressed a similar reaction. She said she had been watching the photographer for a long time and expected him to stop her as she walked onto the street. These people both had a chance to form an opinion of the photographer prior to the interaction.

There were a number of other explanations given for treating the

interaction as an everyday occurrence. One woman was photographing flowers when she was approached. She assumed the photographer was, like her, a student working on a class project. Another lady, although she had no experience with photographers, worked in the hardware store on Kirkwood as a salesperson. She said "...it is my job to be a person to meet people ..." One young man was drinking a beer from a brown paper bag as he walked. He wrote, "Personally I was bored at the time." He remained bored throughout the interaction.

Those who took it in their stride were those who either 1) approached the photographer themselves and asked to have their pictures taken, 2) had time to watch the photographer work before they were approached, or 3) had a similar neutral or positive experience to which to relate it (e.g. were photographed by journalists before, were photographers themselves, or were adept at meeting the public).

Despite the growth of amateur photography, the subjects did not have much familiarity with photography that would affect their response. They were asked, "Do you have any association with photographers or photography that would affect your reaction to being photographed?" Most (see Figure 2) did not. Those who did have some knowledge of photography ranged from owning an instamatic to studying for a Master of Fine Arts degree in photography.

FIGURE 2
Responses to "Do you have any association with photographers or photography that would affect your reaction to being photographed?

Response	Number	%
No.	44	67%
I own a camera.*	11	17
I have a friend who is a photographer.	8	12
I have been photographed before.	3	4
TOTAL	66	100%

*More than 11 people may have owned cameras. That many felt it might affect their reaction to being photographed.

Despite their lack of association with photography, did they have any feeling for why they attracted the photographer's interest? They were asked, "Why do you think the photographer picked you rather than someone else walking down the street?" The photographers had said they picked people for three general reasons: 1) the subjects' actions, 2) the objects they were carrying and 3) physical attractiveness. The subjects felt they had been picked for either of the first two reasons, but did not credit themselves with physical attractiveness. This might be due in part to modesty, but the subjects did not mention personal attributes at all, even in a neutral manner, which would suggest that modesty is not the only explanation. For example, no one said, "Because I am tall" (although one was of basketball-player height), or "Because I have red hair" or "my tan." Instead they said things like:

- I was just in the right place.
- I was wondering that myself.
- I think that I was the only one around at that point.

FIGURE 3

Responses to "Why do you think the photographer picked you rather than someone else walking down the street?"

Explanation	Number	%
My actions (riding skateboard, jogging)	13	19%
Objects I was carrying/attire	11	16
I looked friendly or cooperative	11	16
I was just at the right place at the right time	10	14
Because of the type of person I am (old, normal, Bloomingtonian)	7	9
I don't know	15	22
Other	3	4
	70	100%

There were three interesting exceptions who did mention a physical attribute. Three people responded, "because I am old." (One tempered it a bit by saying, "Perhaps he wanted an Auntie or Grandmother image.") It seems that photographers' penchants for photographing the elderly are well known --enough so that these people attributed it as a motive of the photographer.

The "I looked friendly or cooperative" response was the closest the subjects came to giving themselves credit for drawing the photographer's interest. The rest of the responses placed the responsibility on the photographer, who just happened to be interested in the subject or what he was doing.

The people were asked, "Did the photographer do any specific thing that annoyed you?" Only seven people answered this question by reporting specific actions. The complaints were as follows:

1. When he asked for our name and address, we were somewhat disturbed because we did not want to be solicited for purchase of photographs.

2. Only that he didn't seem relaxed.

3. After he explained and was ready to shoot, he said, "Glasses on? On or off? It's your choice." What a tart remark to someone who's doing you a favor.

4. Didn't bother to note our request for copies of pictures --said she'd just "remember"--then said she'd had many requests for copies of pictures. Kind of contradictory, huh?

5. No, well I just felt he wasn't completely sincere because of some of the things he said. He appeared to be trying to put me at ease.

6. At first it seemed that the photographer was taking a general street shot but as I tried to stay out of the way, he seemed to abruptly swing around and focus on my friend and me. I found that slightly annoying.

7. (The photographer had mentioned her frown) I am glad she said though that I was frowning, when she took my second picture, close up. I have trouble with my eyes and I think I take a horrible picture.

Although the question asked for annoying actions, a number of people used the question to compliment the photographer. They responded, for example, "No, she was very much to the point and efficient," or "No, his approach and explanation of the situation was discreet." There were a total of thirteen such "emphatic no" responses.

Many of the responses to the question "Did the photographer do any specific thing that pleased you?" were also unspecific (e.g. "yes, he was nice"), but over half the respondents used it to compliment the photographer. The most common answer was interesting; many people were pleased that the photographer wanted to take their picture at all. The act itself pleased them without the photographer having to do anything above and beyond it. As one man remarked, "Just the fact that she wanted to take my picture made me feel good. Also, I believe in helping my fellowman in any way possible. If it helped her, all the better." This reaction is interesting in light of the initial reaction of surprise that a photographer would want to take their picture. Perhaps the subjects did not see themselves as anything special; the fact that the photographer singled them out both surprised and pleased them.

The second common response to the question "Did the photographer do any specific thing that pleased you?" was that the photographer said something that was pleasing. What they said did not have to be anything big. Some responses were:

-he complimented my son.

-he gave me a recommendation for a photographic series.

-he said that he, too, in California, had become somewhat inured to being photographed.

-she said I did all right.

-he commented on my glasses, saying that he never saw any like them before.

These small amenities pleased the subjects who seemed to feel they were not being used simply as photographic objects.

In addition to those two most common responses, the subjects listed a number of general adjectives, calling the photographers, for instance, interested, quick, alert, efficient and courteous.

The answers to the two questions requesting comments on specific actions suggest that the subjects' reactions to the photographers were not based on easily identifiable actions on the part of the photographers. Instead they were based on more ambiguous, perhaps nonverbal, actions. They were also based on the subject's reaction to the somewhat unusual situation as a whole.

The subjects were also asked to step away from their immediate situation and respond to the more general question, "Do you think it is OK for photographers to shoot pictures of people on the street? When is it OK and when isn't it?" The questions were purposely phrased in a general manner so as not to set an agenda for the response by suggesting possible objections to street photography. The second question was intended to encourage more-than-one-word replies. Indeed, some respondents wrote

lengthy answers. The answers were revealing.

FIGURE 4
Responses to the question, "Is it OK for photographers to shoot pictures of people on the street?"

It is always OK	20%		
No, it is not OK	2%		
It is sometimes OK	78%		
If photographer has permission		42%	
a) prior permission			6%
b) tacit permission			12%
c) post permission			12%
d) permission, general			12%
If photograph is in good taste		17%	
If doesn't inconvenience subject		11%	
Other qualifications		8%	
TOTAL	100% (n=65)		

The people who responded with unqualified yes's were often effusive, elaborating "anywhere, anytime" or "I think its' great." Only one person gave an unqualified no. In his answer he discussed things he felt were destroying this country; one was abusive use of freedom of the press. However, the man's actions were not antagonistic to the photographer who shot his picture --quite the opposite. He posed for her whenever she lifted her camera, and seemed quite amiable.

The large majority of people (78%) felt it was generally all right for photographers to shoot street pictures with qualifications. The qualification most often mentioned was permission. Close to half the people who answered the question mentioned the photographer should get the subject's permission either to take or use the photograph. However, only three people specified that the photographer should get <u>prior</u> permission to photograph on the street. The rest of the people were less stringent about the timing

of the permission. Some even felt that proper permission had been obtained so long as the subject did not object to what the photographer was doing--active agreement was not necessary. Some responses were:

> I feel it's perfectly all right to photograph anyone on the street or in public--unless they specifically ask not to be photographed.
>
> If the person doesn't want their picture taken or objects I don't think the photographer should force it.
>
> Permission is a must for a good photographer.
>
> Not unless the individual's permission is requested... Generally, however, I feel photos should be released by the individuals whose picture has been taken.
>
> It's OK, but afterwards if they intend to use the photos in any way, they should ask permission--and abide by the individual's wishes.

Most photojournalists in a non-news situation operate using tacit and post permission. A common pattern is to shoot first, then ask for ID's. If identification is given, permission is assumed. The photographer will stop along the way during this process if the subject objects. There are exceptions in both directions, of course. One photographer on a large paper in this area will not shoot any photographs at all without prior permission. The obvious example in the opposite direction is Ron Gallela, the infamous pursuer of Jacqueline Onassis. Two of the respondents mentioned Gallela. One wrote:

> If they have consent. It's always helpful. Otherwise photogs and papparazo like Ron Gallela are in my estimation fair game for any number of threats and acts of violence perpetrated upon them by people like Jackie. A lot of <u>sick</u> people on the streets, honey!

After permission, the most common qualification the subjects put on street photography was good taste. This included making sure the photograph did not harm or embarrass the subject in any way. The other common answer was that the photographer should not inconvenience their subjects unreasonably. There were a variety of other responses. Three people

noted that the photographs should not be used for commercial purposes. Three people mentioned that the photographs should not be taken for political reasons. Five people reminded the photographers to be sensitive to their subjects. Finally, four people had the interesting idea that photographers should not shoot pictures of unhappy people. This response would probably dismay many photographers, but is understandable from the subject's viewpoint. People said, for example,

> Yes (It is OK) when the subject is or seems happy and interested in things. It isn't OK when they seem troubled.
>
> If a person is in a bad or distressed mood, I don't think I would advise it.
>
> Sometimes you are depressed or feel ugly, tired. You don't want many people to look at you that way--why don't (photographers) wait for another time when you are cheered up?

It is unlikely the last suggestion would be followed to the letter by any photojournalists who wanted to photograph people as they appear when the camera is not present, but it is a reaction that should be taken into consideration by a photographer as he talks with his subject afterwards.

Although these results cannot be generalized to the population without further supportive evidence, they suggest that people do not feel their images are being stolen by photojournalists. On the contrary, there was a favorable, cooperative response by the people approached by the photographers.

Both the low rejection rate (13%), and the comments made by those people who agreed to be photographed, present a different picture than the one that emerged from Milgram's study. There were a number of important differences between the two studies, of course: the location, the use of professional photographers rather than students, and the explanation given for wanting to photograph the subjects. It could be that the two studies reflect differences in attitudes toward professional versus amateur street photography,

or location differences. A replication of this study in a large city would help pinpoint the differences.

The generally cooperative spirit found in this study was tempered by an initial suspicion and incomprehension of the photographers' motives, most of which disappeared in conversation with the photographers. Further, many people thought that permission should be sought by the photojournalists. On the whole, nowever, people were willing to have their images reproduced. Something that is freely given cannot be considered stolen.

Footnotes

1. Stanley Milgram, "The image freezing machine," in S. Milgram, The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments, Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Reading, Massachusetts, 1977, p. 343.

2. Ellen Goodman, "More than pictures taken," News Photographer, March 1977, p. 18 (Reprint of a syndicated column).

3. Wayne Kelly, "Letters: Take that! Ellen Goodman," News Photographer, March 1977, p. 36.

4. Dick Swoboda, "Letters: More than a public statement," News Photographer, March 1977, p. 37

5. Susan Sontag, On Photography, Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York, 1977, p. 14.

6. A.D. Coleman, "Taking Pictures: Photography and the Territorial Imperative," Camera 35, December 1976 (Vol. 20, no. 9) p. 29.